# FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
# OCTOBER 6, 2002

# THE GATHERING
# John M. Buchanan

The church in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding.

The Book of Confessions
The Confession of 1967
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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**THE GATHERING**
**October 6, 2002**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 133**
**Ephesians 1:3-10**

**"A plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."**
**Ephesians 1:10 (NRSV)**

*O God, as the world gathers around tables to eat and drink together today, remind us that we come to your table with our whole extended family, brothers and sisters of every nation and race. Bless that global table with your peace. And gather up all of us in your love; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

"The best laid plans of mice and men . . . ," Robert Burns wrote. The plan was for the Reverend Hector Mendez, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Havana, to be in our pulpit this morning. One year ago today, World Communion Sunday, a group of us from Fourth Presbyterian Church were in Cuba, and I was preaching to the remarkable congregation of the First Presbyterian Church in Old Havana.

On that occasion I invited Hector and his family to visit us in Chicago and Hector to preach to our congregation and he accepted.

Well—the best laid plans . . . Our government did not issue his visa. It takes much longer than usual these days as we are discovering. We are very disappointed, and we hope Hector will visit us soon to share with us the remarkable story of the church in Cuba, to give us the opportunity to extend our hospitality as the Cuban people welcomed us, and to continue to build a working partnership between that critical urban congregation in Havana and our own here in Chicago. Hector sent an e-mail Friday and wrote:

> Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:
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> I am writing to you today Friday, October 4. We did not do it before because we had the hope that our visas would arrive so that we could make it on time to travel and fulfill the invitation that you made to my family and myself to share with you on World Communion Sunday.
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> We are very sad not to be able to accompany you. We are sad because it is a great privilege to be able to share with you in such a special and significant day like World Communion Sunday, when millions of Christians get together around the Lord's Table.

The message we had prepared to preach in this occasion is very simple:

Our intention is to share the testimony of the Cuban church, a church that in the midst of difficult times knew how to keep its faith to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nowadays the Cuban church is a renewed church because of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a church that trusts in God and not in human structures.

Next Sunday in our First Presbyterian Reformed Church of Havana, we will have some time devoted to prayers and intercession. We will be praying for you, for the Presbytery of Chicago, for our sister churches, the government and the people of the USA. By participating in the Sacrament in the Holy Communion, you in Chicago and all of us here in Havana, will be telling once again to the world that nothing and no one can separate the big family of the Christian faith.

We hope that someday we will be able to be with you. Once again we want to express our gratitude for your generous invitation and we will keep you in our prayers.

May the blessing of God and his peace accompany us always in fulfilling his mission so that we can be "A LIGHT IN THE CITY."

In Christ's love,

Rev. Dr. Héctor Méndez and family
Pastor of the First Presbyterian Reformed Church of Havana

We were in Cuba last year just three weeks after September 11. We were uneasy about traveling, particularly to a country our own nation has embargoed for forty years and treated like an enemy and tried to invade and whose president we tried to assassinate. We were also there on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bombing of a Cuban airliner, a bombing their government has blamed on the CIA. On that Saturday, a rally commemorating the event was held in the Plaza of the Revolution. We wanted to see it and Hector assured us that we would be safe and welcome. So we went. One million Cubans crowded into the huge plaza. Billboards displayed giant graphic images of the airliner exploding and the letters USA–CIA. There were loudspeakers blaring salsa music, water trucks, and a million Cuban flags, and Castro spoke. And there was something else: without exception the Cuban people we encountered (and of course they knew we were Americans), smiled, expressed sympathy, even gave us as gifts the little paper flags they were carrying. It was a remarkable experience of our common humanity with people from whom we have been divided for years.

In the crowded sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana, the next day, on World Communion Sunday, we experienced it again. It has not been easy to be a visible, self-affirming Christian in Cuba for the past forty years.

But since 1999, due at least in part to Castro's need for international goodwill and capital, the climate has changed dramatically for the church in Cuba. Churches are full; young people particularly are going to church. Our Reformed Seminary at Matanzas is full.

When we were in worship I assisted Hector with the Sacrament of Baptism. There were three infants and their large families in the chancel. One fine young adult, the choir director, a twenty-five-year-old member of the National Opera Company, publicly proclaimed his faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized.

When it came time to break the bread and pour out the cup, I assisted Hector and a few of our Elders helped serve the elements, and we all experienced something of the oneness of the church, and the unity in Christ that transcends boundaries of nationality, race, ideology. And we experienced something of the mandate to peace and harmony and reconciliation to which Jesus Christ calls us.

We come to the table of our Lord this morning, World Communion Sunday 2002, with a painful sense of the world's brokenness in so many places, in so many ways, and a very real prospect of war. A year ago, for a brief moment in time, following September 11, there was an unusual sense of oneness and unity in our own nation and an extraordinary solidarity internationally. "We are all Americans" the French press announced, and sympathy poured in from the world. When our president declared war on terrorism, the world community was largely supportive. An international military coalition was quickly and skillfully assembled with broad participation. Some suggested that it was a hopeful, promising moment and that those who died on September 11 did not die in vain, that their tragic deaths would result in a new American commitment to international cooperation, to a renewed American commitment to the United Nations, our allies, and international treaties and protocols.

Some suggested that, after a brief flirtation with unilateralism, we had finally learned that although we are the lone super power in the world, our vulnerability to terrorism had stopped us in our tracks and reminded us that we must live in the world, not in the splendid isolation of our military power, but as a partner, as a friend, a nation among nations.

One year later we are in a very different place. And tragically the world is divided and broken, perhaps as deeply as it has been for decades. There is an important national conversation happening right now about what we should do or not do about Iraq and its dictatorship. There are healthy differences of opinion, and let me say clearly that after four decades of ministry punctuated by occasional confident pronouncements about this and that, I am less confidant than ever. This is not simple. There are people who know a lot more than I do. They are good people. I trust them.

Furthermore, I try to hold myself to a standard of worldly realism when it comes to complicated political and international realities. We don't always have easy or good choices. My model and mentor is Reinhold Neibuhr. In the 1930s, a decade after the terrible slaughter of the First World War, when most theological voices were still speaking of pacifism and the evil of all warfare, Niebuhr warned that Nazism was an evil so monumental that it was a moral imperative to oppose

it with all available means and ultimately by force. My inspiration has been Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian, who was a pacifist but who also was compelled by the horrific evils of the Third Reich to change his mind about the use of force and who ultimately helped plan an assassination attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer was arrested and hanged a few days before the end of the war.

I want my nation to be strong, prepared, and willing to use its power for right reasons. I am deeply proud of the men and women of our armed forces and their readiness to be thrown into combat, to fight and die for this nation. For what it was worth, I thought the coalition assembled by President Bush and the military actions when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991 was a right and good decision, an opinion not universally applauded in religious circles.

But my faith in God, the creator of all, and in God's Son, Jesus Christ, compels me, particularly on World Communion Sunday, to voice my concern for my nation and for its apparent determination to initiate a war, for the first time in its history to start a war with a nation that has not attacked us and that poses no immediate threat to us, without the support of the United Nations or our allies.

My inclination is always to support elected officials, the president. But in this I cannot. My reasons for saying so publicly grow out of my own faith but also what seems to me an unprecedented level of concern among my congregation and people I know. I received a note last week from a former member of this congregation who is a St. Louis Cardinals fan and writes occasionally to torment me about the dismal performance of the Cubs, a retired businessman who I doubt very much is soft on our enemies or reluctant to see our country use its military power appropriately and victoriously. The end-of-the-season letter I received last week about the results of the baseball season contained a large full-page newspaper ad with thousands of signatures. The text read: "Is a War Justified? President Bush has challenged the UN Security Council to deal with Iraq's refusal to admit UN weapons inspectors, but he has not presented a case for a pre-emptive strike. He has said that the United States is willing to mount an attack without UN approval." The statement observed that a unilateral initiation of war would be a rejection of the "system of international collective security in place since World War II." It was a thoughtful statement. Bill sent it to me because he—an individual, a Presbyterian Christian—had organized the project and he wanted his minister to know about it.

My fervent prayer is that we will not do this alone—not in spite of what happened to us on September 11, but because of it. My prayer is that we will patiently and courageously pursue the policy of containment that has worked for ten years, and that we will patiently work with other nations in defining what constitutes a threat and how best to deal with it.

What I hope for and pray for, for my children and grandchildren, is a world of international cooperation represented by the United Nations. What I hope and pray for is a strong United States, leader of the free world, leader of the whole world, supportive of every effort to join hands with others in dealing with the world's problems and its well-being and its very existence—poverty and disease and hunger and environment and economic development and human rights—and also in opposing tyranny and terrorism and securing the safety of all people.

And when I contemplate what is being proposed, a pre-emptive strike, against an Arab nation, alone if need be, with the potential for massive civilian causalities, I understand that my nation is moving in an altogether different direction—a unilateral direction—and I must say, as a believer, as one who loves God and my country, that I dissent.

So what? The minister is against the war. Tell me something new. Is there any reason the minister's political opinions are more important than anyone else's? No. Heaven forbid! But, let me share with you briefly my reasons.

Their source is the Bible, that passage of scripture from Paul's letter to the early Christian church in Ephesians: "He—God—has made known to us a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up [the RSV translates that "unite"] a plan to gather up—or unite—all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Paul has launched into a discussion of God's purposes in creating a world and human beings to live in the world. What's it all about? What is human life for? Wendell Berry put it recently, "Paul lifts up and articulates a huge theme of the Bible, the central theme; God's purpose is peace, harmony, reconciliation. God's operating principal is to mend what is broken, to heal, to forgive, to bring back together what is separated—to gather up all things on earth and in heaven."

And in Jesus Christ we Christians believe God has acted decisively to move the human project along. In Jesus Christ, God has brought into being a community of reconciliation in the world called the Church of Jesus Christ.

We need a little encouragement today, World Communion Sunday, as our beloved nation prepares for war. I found a symbol of hope last Monday evening in, of all places, an Arab Christian village in Israel, perhaps the most violently conflicted place on earth, with hatred and distrust deeper than anything most of us can imagine. On Monday evening I attended our public forum on Iraq and listened to Sandra Mackey's very thoughtful presentation. And then I drove up to North Park University to hear and say hello to a remarkable man, Father Elias Chacour.

Chacour is a Melkite Catholic priest in Ibillin, a Christian Arab village in Israel. He is a Palestinian. Along with his entire village, he was evicted from his home and like millions of Palestinians became a refugee in 1947. But he also became an Israeli citizen and a priest.

Fr. Chacour was assigned to the town of Ibillin in 1965, and he set about immediately on a ministry of peace and reconciliation in one of the most tragically violent environments in the world. He founded the Elias Educational Institute, which today includes 4000 children and young people in seven schools—kindergarten, elementary, technical, and a brand new university. Students come from all over Israel and Palestine to live and study together in Ibillin; Christians, Muslim, Druze, and, until two years ago, Jews.

Without rancor or resentment, Chacour talks about reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. "I am a beggar," he said. "I beg not for your money. I beg for your friendship. I beg you to love your Jewish friends and neighbors who need your love just now. I beg you to love your Palestinian neighbor who also needs your love." And then Chacour told the story that set me

to thinking about God's agenda for the world and hope and reconciliation and all of us gathering at the Lord's Table on World Communion Sunday.

A young Palestinian walked into a crowded marketplace in Tel Aviv last year and blew himself up. Sixteen Israelis were killed, eighty-six were seriously injured. It was among the most dreadful incidents. Eighty-six critically injured people is a lot. Blood supplies for transfusions ran dangerously low. Father Chacour contacted the Jewish hospital in Tel Aviv and arranged for a blood drive at the upper schools in Ibillin. Three hundred and fifty students and employees volunteered immediately. Fifteen ambulances from the Jewish hospital, staffed by fifteen Jewish nurses, parked outside the school and processed the volunteers. And then the fifteen ambulances delivered 350 pints of Muslim/Christian blood and transfused it—giving life back to eighty-six Jews.

That sounded like something God has in mind for the human project.

That's the gathering St. Paul envisioned.

> "A plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Thanks be to God.